"There are just two of us," replied Mikhail. "A skiff with a pair of oars is all we need."

The peasant shook his head. "If you are only two, better stay where you are. People do not move by twos in these places."

"Is the river bad?" I asked.

"The river is good, but the people are bad at this season. Look at those fellows! Who knows where they come from and where they are going? To slash the throat of a man for his shoes and belt is as easy for them as that. . . ."

"Nobody will slash our throats," said Mikhail, and he showed the man a small Browning he carried in his hip pocket.

The peasant looked at him intently and decided, "Maybe you can go in a skiff. I have one at the landing place, not new but still good. Ten rubles is a fair price."

The skiff was patched and almost black from weather, but, after a careful inspection, Mikhail found it seaworthy. We bought it and went to the village to get our luggage.

The sun was low when we finished loading. Mikhail took the oars and let me operate the rudder. The current was unexpectedly strong; in no time Kachuga had disappeared behind the river bend and we were on a winding stream, with the virgin forest all around us. There was no trace of human habitation on the shores, but the river was full of life, with hundreds of boats moving downstream. The air resounded with songs, the thumping of balalaikas, and the trills of accordions.

A boat with some fifteen men on board overtook us. Passing close to our skiff and almost touching it, the steersman, a dashing prospector, his vest all covered with silver buttons, asked derisively, "Only two in your party? How far do you expect to go?"

"We shall meet you at the gold fields, brother!" answered Mikhail.

"Good luck, and look around!" shouted the steersman.

Suddenly it became dark and cold on the river. We put on our overcoats. The banks rose higher, the stars became brighter. The water was pitch black.

"We could go on all night," Mikhail suggested. "You can sleep at the stern and later we can change places."

The water was gurgling beneath us, behind the boat, and under the oars, and I fell asleep. I woke up when Mikhail called my name. He was sitting still, his oars out of the water, listening intently.

"What has happened?" I asked him.

"A boat is following us."

"I hear nothing."

"They stopped when I stopped rowing. Listen now. . . ."